



ASK THE PRO

puppy prep

By Bart Peterson

AN OWNER with a puppy prospect shows up with his new puppy – group is gathered around with a couple of older dogs. The pup is brought out to meet the crew and immediately starts to bark and cower at the new faces ...

The young pup arrives for training. You're informed that he is very outgoing and bold and so will make a great trial dog. The owner gets the dog out to show you his fine charge, and the pup immediately jumps in the open door of your dog truck spilling your coffee. He then jumps out and runs to the bird pen barking wildly and paying no heed to the person chasing him and yelling at him ...

These are just a couple of scenarios that are occasionally presented when accepting (or not) new, young dogs for training or evaluation. Pups often arrive with great hope and expectations usually resulting in some type of evaluation or opinion about how the dog is or is not prepared to enter a training program.

I am not intending this to be an article on how to train your puppy. There are some very good DVDs and publications available that

will deal with methods and techniques – you can consult with your pro for advice and instruction. I simply want to bring to light some of the key issues in raising your puppy that will help when it comes time to enter a formal training program. These suggestions are based on my own observations and some thoughts that other professionals and amateurs have shared with me.

I have broken down what I believe to be four key areas in raising a puppy.

Socialization
Crate Training / House Breaking
Obedience / Discipline Boundaries
Retrieving / Field Performance Introduction to Birds

Socialization

If nothing else, this may be the number one key factor in raising a puppy. Your puppy needs to be exposed to all of the things that will affect his life at a young age. People, dogs, noises, travel as well as trips to the vet, are all part of this learning experience. Depending on their temperament, some pups may need to be introduced more carefully, while others may not be bothered by anything.

Read your dog. A field trailer that I know has raised several very nice dogs and routinely takes very young pups to all trials and training sessions. This way puppies learn about all things related to life. These include feeding and airing schedules, accepting being kenneled and all the noises smells and activities that abound. Get your puppy out and about. This is a great time to introduce him to a lead and choke chain. Walk around the block on lead. Go to the vet. I have a client who has a dog-friendly business that takes his puppies to work with him, all of this leads to a well-rounded future.

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Crate Training/House Breaking

Retriever puppies are usually naturally clean by nature, especially if having come from a good breeder. However, once selected from the litter, your job will be to establish good habits and airing routines, as well as having the puppy accept being confined. This is accomplished by crate training and house breaking. I personally believe that puppies raised in the home are cleaner, quicker to learn and develop more trust therefore bonding better with people. This will be a decision you have to consider, and for some may not be practical or possible.

Wherever you chose to raise your puppy, crate training is still vital to developing a clean living routine, good airing habits and prepares the pup to accept being on and off your or your pro's truck throughout life. Crate training takes devotion and patience but it usually goes pretty quickly, and the benefits are all positive. You, your pro, and your puppy will all be happier for it.

Obedience/Discipline/Boundaries

Young retrievers can – and should – begin understanding certain rules and commands at an early age. This starts when your puppy comes home, and will continue to be a major factor in defining behavioral patterns as he matures. Early obedience commands such as “sit” and “here” can usually be encouraged and taught through playful activity and rewards such as treats or retrieve games. As your pup catches on you can extend his response by making him sit and wait to be fed or sit and then come to you. Remember, at this point you are teaching and using positive reinforcement, his learning and response is almost natural.

Along with learning to respond to given commands, your pup needs to begin to understand a certain amount of discipline or good citizenship. My wife refers to unruly puppies as “they know no boundaries.” As they grow up, try to curb undesirable behavior, such as jumping on people, getting into things that are none of his business – barking or climbing on the furniture are examples. Teach him “NO!” Some of this may be met with negative reinforcement. Learning right from wrong and having a fundamental understanding of how to respond to given commands at a young age, will play a major role in how your pup will respond to and accept advanced training.

Retrieving/Field Performance/Introduction to Birds

Most well bred puppies are enthusiastic retrievers at seven weeks of age. You can



begin simple retrieves with small dummies – and birds if properly introduced – almost immediately. During house breaking, I will do retrieves down a hallway to encourage coming straight back to me. You can also begin to work on steadiness or waiting to be sent. As your pup develops, you can do hand thrown or short gunner thrown marks in the yard. Keep birds or bumpers visible and easy to find and keep them short enough so that he will always return directly to you.

If bad habits develop, such as mouthing or playing with dummies or birds, not returning or parading, you may want to back off and move to a more controlled environment. If your pup has not been introduced to birds, start slowly by encouraging him to pick up and carry a bird. I usually like to use a smaller bird like a pigeon, but many pups are okay with ducks.

Some will be more aggressive and readily start to retrieve birds while some will be more curious and tentative, requiring more patience and encouragement. If you get an extremely aggressive pup who is rough with birds, be very careful not to let him develop bad habits. It may be best to limit him to dummies until you or your pro have taken the time to properly go through a good force fetch program. When your youngster is ready, you can start simple field marks, again keeping birds easy to

find and distances within his ability, while always maintaining good habits and mechanics.

Raising a retriever puppy to prepare for a life of competition or to be a top notch gun dog is a big commitment, but can be very enjoyable and rewarding. There are a number of factors that need to be dealt with along the way that will enhance an affect a young dog's personality and demeanor, and have great influence on his/her performance and ability when placed into a training program. These fundamentals, which should begin at a young age, will make the transition to your pro easier. These fundamentals will also allow the dog to advance in training at a faster, more seamless pace. ■

Bar Ten Kennel Bart Peterson

Bart owns and operates Bar Ten Kennel in Cozad Nebraska. He has had dogs qualified for the National Open and the National Amateur Retriever Championships, finished FC and AFC titles, along with numerous Qualified All-age and Derby list dogs. Visit Bart online at www.bartenkennel.com

*“Ask the Pro”
is written by a
member of the
Professional*



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